**"Yes, But Suppose Everyone Turned Gay?"
The Structure of Attitudes Toward LGBT Rights among
Islamic Youth in Belgium.**

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S U M M A R Y

Abstract

Various quantitative studies have suggested the occurrence of hostile feelings toward LGBT rights among Islamic communities in Western societies. We know less, however, about the structure and determinants of these attitudes among this group. Based on focus groups and in-depth interviews, we try to disentangle these elements. The interviews suggest that feelings toward LGBT rights among this group are not based on a discourse of individual rights but are considered within the background of dense family relations, strongly linked to notions of family honor and the duty of the individual to contribute to the stability of the family and the community. While the respondents endorsed the notion that the basic scriptures of Islam prohibit homosexual behavior, there was more disagreement about what this entails for the moral status of the individual involved in this kind of behavior. It is suggested that this form of disagreement might serve as a leverage point for the development of a more tolerant outlook toward LGBT rights among Islamic communities in Western societies. Rather than to antagonize various groups in the community, it is suggested that efforts to reduce prejudice against LGBT youth should take into consideration the role of various cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

In 1999, Susan Moller Okin wondered whether multiculturalism is “bad for women”. Okin’s fear was that the structural trend toward the recognition of gender equality in Western societies might be reversed as a result of the efforts of various governments and government agencies to accommodate the culture and the value patterns of ethnic minorities. The recognition of multiculturalism could lead, so it was feared, to a reinforcement of traditional gender roles (Okin et al., 1999).

In the more recent literature, various authors have wondered in a similar manner whether multiculturalism is a good development for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender persons (LGBT) and their equal opportunity rights. Recent survey data indeed could be taken as a cause for concern. While since the 1960s most Western societies have developed a more tolerant outlook toward LGBT rights, this is not necessarily the case for ethnic minorities, and there is even some concern that this trend might actually be reversed in some diverse or multicultural societies. In a number of cities in Western Europe, tensions have arisen between LGBT residents and young members of ethnic minorities and in a number of instances this has even led to acts of violence directed against LGBT people (Janoff, 2005). In the Netherlands, the derogatory remarks on homosexuals by a prominent imam caused controversy (Hekma, 2002). In a response to these developments, a number of local authorities have developed specific campaigns to target feelings of homophobia among ethnic minority youth. Among many other examples, the city government of Berlin is co-sponsoring a campaign that specifically targets the Turkish community in the city (Dworek & Zinn, 2007). The fundamental normative discussion in this respect is of course whether tolerance toward the value patterns of ethnic minorities can extend toward non-liberal attitudes among these minorities (Merry, 2005).

Earlier research has shown that there indeed could be some reason for concern: ethnic minorities tend to score higher on conventional scales for homophobia than other groups within society (Yip, 2004), and this observation was valid both for adults as for adolescents (Hooghe et al., 2009). This kind of quantitative studies, however, only tell part of the story and it is important not to take them at face value. Rosik, Griffith and Cruz (2007) have pointed our attention to the fact that the scales that are most often used in this kind of research all originate in a liberal, rights-oriented approach toward homosexuality, which is often at odds with a more religiously-inspired understanding of homosexuality and homosexual behavior. Basically, this would imply that the measurement scales for homophobia that are conventionally used are not sufficiently cross-culturally valid to allow for an unbiased understanding of the feelings toward homosexuality among various religious groups. These scales indeed originate from a secularized Western research setting and very little effort has been devoted to the question whether these scales can be used meaningfully in a more religious context. Therefore, we suggest supplementing the existing quantitative research on tolerance toward homosexuality with a more in-depth understanding of the structure of attitudes toward homosexuality and toward equal rights for LGBT groups.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted among Islamic minority groups in Belgium where we recruited mainly younger respondents. We focused on these respondents, first

because of the current concern about the alleged rise of anti-homophobic feelings among this group. A second motive was that focusing on Islamic youth in Europe also allows for a broader understanding of the process of value development. Islam now accounts for 2 to 3 per cent of the population of Belgium, and a typical pattern is that most Islamic believers were born in Belgium, descending from parents that came to the country two or three decades ago. This implies that young Islamic believers in Belgium have been exposed both to the norms prevalent in the Belgian education system, as to the norms inherent in the education process within their families. Among the older generation, this intercultural influence is less likely to occur, because most of them were socialized in a different country of origin, which renders it more likely that their value pattern will be strongly influenced by the prevailing norms and values in countries like Turkey or Morocco. Historical and anthropological research suggests that the attitudes toward homosexuality in these countries will be predominantly restrictive (Murray & Roscoe, 1997). Since the younger generation was born and grew up in Belgium, we can assume the occurrence of a stronger effect of the interaction between Belgian and Islamic culture during the socialization process. The interview material that we present in this article allows for a better understanding of the interaction between these two, sometimes conflicting, value patterns. Self-evidently, given the strong variety in interpretations of Islam, the current research effort has no ambitions at all to offer a comprehensive understanding of the attitude of Islamic groups toward homosexuality, but we hope we can offer a better understanding of the attitudes among some Islamic groups in Belgian society.

In this article we first review the literature on religion and attitudes toward LGBT rights, with a special focus on the role of Islam. We will use mainly research conducted in the Netherlands, but in general it can be stated that Belgium and the Netherlands are not just neighboring countries, but they also closely resemble one another in various economic and structural aspects. As far as we know, there are no scholarly publications available on this topic, specifically for the Belgian context. Subsequently, we explain our data and methods, before presenting the results of our interviews, focusing on the structure of the opposition to LGBT rights. We also review religion, family background and socio-economic status as possible determinants of these attitudes, before closing with some considerations on what these findings might imply for policies aimed at reducing hostility toward LGBT rights.

(...)

The attitudes of young Muslims towards homosexuality

General reaction towards homosexuality

In attitudinal scales on homophobia, one of the most powerful questions captures the reaction of the respondent toward having a homosexual friend. Posing the question in this manner brings the topic “home”, and integrates it into the real world experience of the respondent. For our interviews too, we considered this could as a good starting point for

the discussion. We observed clear gender differences in the answers to this questions. Female respondents expressed some uneasiness about a gay or lesbian friend, but we did not encounter any outright rejection:

Girl 7: “We did figure out somehow [that person X was gay]. That was that. It was very normal, very cool. Not like we started to turn up our noses or so.”

Girl 10: “I would easier to accept a male gay friend than a lesbian friend. [...] Because a lesbian friend, before she was lesbian, you would often sit with linked arms, she would sleep over...and then if you would hear that she is a lesbian...that would be a bit frightening, and I would keep some distance for a few days. But if it is my best friend, then in the long run I would accept it.”

Among the boys, however, there was far less empathy toward a homosexual friend:

Boy 3: “I would still have a connection to him... but it would not be a staunch friendship anymore like with the other friends.”

Boy 1: “This [friendship] will always create some incertitude among the other people. I might have a good connection with him, but because his character is different and he thinks otherwise, it will be difficult.”

Boy 2: “I have nothing against it either but look...gays.... that’s just not human (laughter)”.

Concern about countering a negative prejudice toward the Islamic community, however, still was present. Almost all the respondents in the interviews denied that LGBT youngsters would have a hard time with their families, or that they would be outright rejected by their community. At least, none of the interviewed had ever heard a story like that:

Girl 2: “No, and certainly not about death threats or so...I am really shocked hearing about that.”

Girl 5: “Everybody knows about [X] that he is gay, but nobody says something about it.”

One of the reasons for this lack of knowledge or experience might be that families where one of the members is LGBT, will tend to shield this information as a family secret, so that the word does not spread. As one of the religious counselors in the mosque told us, this is not something that is announced publicly within the community:

Resp 2: “In an Islamic environment we never had problems of that kind [...]. We never heard of families that were in trouble with their kids, a family with a homosexual. [...] Maybe it exists, but we’ve never heard of it. Because a family with a gay son or daughter, that is a disgrace for the family, then it becomes a drama.”

Family, therefore, obviously is an important element in the acceptance of LGBT feelings. On the one hand one could speculate that a strong inner-family solidarity will ensure

feelings of solidarity with a family member, but on the other hand the importance of keeping up the honor of the family might lead to a rejection of that family member. In all interviews, the expectation was that especially parents would react in a strong negative manner to the coming out of their son or daughter:

Girl 10: "If my brother or sister would be gay, I would be ashamed for them. I would not be more distant towards them; I would just disapprove of it. And I would tell them 'I disapprove that'. [...] But it would still be my brother or sister."

Girl 8: "I think my parents would really try to change that [the sexual identity]."

Girl 10: "Mine would try to brainwash him, and if that doesn't work, well then... 'You can find your way out' would probably be the conclusion. No, my parents would really not accept that."

Several other girls simultaneously: "Mine neither"

Families seem to play a crucial role in the acceptance of a coming out, and this also became apparent in the interviews we had with young LGBT members of the Islamic community. For two of them, their coming out simply had meant the end of the relationship with their extended family:

LGBT 1: "I fell in love with a boy and in the euphoria of my crush I told my parents about it...I knew what the possible consequences would be, but I thought it would never come to it...Anyhow, thirty minutes later I was thrown out on the street."

LGBT 2: "When I was eighteen I was thrown out of the house. We already had our share of disputes, but the main part was 'you're gay' and 'that does not fit in our worldview' and whatever more..."

Other LGBT respondents never opted for a real coming out, although they assumed that for most family members it was quite clear what was their sexual identity or their sexual preference:

LGBT 3: "When I ask myself 'why can I not tell this [to my family]?' and I wonder if it is because I would be rejected ... I think not, this will not be possible. The reason I'm not telling is ... my mother does not know why a person becomes homosexual or is born like that...because she is so sensitive, I fear that she would get a heart attack or something. (...) I would never forgive myself."

LGBT 4: "My parents know, but I never really told them straightforward. But they know and they don't make much fuss over it as long as I stay discrete and do not show it too much."

What these interviews make clear is the strong cultural embeddedness of attitudes toward homosexuality. The attitude toward homosexuality is always seen in relational terms by the respondents: it is not just an individual sexual preference, but homosexuality does have a bearing on the rest of the family, and the reputation of that family.

(...)

Family and community

Not just religion plays an important role in the attitude toward homosexuality, but also family and community ties. Islamic minorities in Belgium tend to live highly concentrated in the major urban centers of the country, as is the case in other Western European countries. This spatial concentration, that is partly caused by discriminatory practices on the housing market, often means that extended families and community ties are very strongly present, with a large degree of informal social control. This setting too, has a strong impact on the attitude toward homosexuality or toward a coming out as LGBT. From different reactions of the respondents we learned that this spatial proximity and strong relational ties often are a strong catalyst in behavior towards homosexuality in a family:

LGBT 4: “We live in a neighborhood with very few Moroccan families [...] and that has been a ‘blessing’ because my parents don’t worry about it that much. If we had lived in a street with only Moroccan families it would have been completely different for them.”

Girl 10: “If you are in a tight-knit community like the Turks, you will end up outside the group anyway. If I would become a lesbian, I would not dare to speak up about it. In such a community you don’t even tell your friends about it.”

Pressed on the topic of why families took such a strong interest in the sexual preferences of young adults, we often encountered the argument that this is after all a family affair, that should not be looked upon from a purely individual point of view. A homosexual life style has a bearing on the entire family, our respondents explained:

Girl 7: “It is very important for a woman to have children. If I cannot have children myself, than that is ok, no problem. But if you can have children and you don’t...that would be very bad.”

Boy 2: “Normally a man should have a family. If he is older his children will take care of him. That is what life is actually about. [...] Of course I hope that I will one day have children (all the other boys say ‘*Insjallah*’ to this).”

Boy 3: “Otherwise the balance of nature will be distorted...”

Boy 4: “Suppose everybody turns gay. If you have a society with 15 men and 15 woman, and those 15 men are gay, than you have a societal problem, because then there are no future generations...”

This obligation toward the family and the community to take care of the next generations, was being felt strongly by the LGBT respondents in our interviews too. Even when it was clear what their sexual identity was, the expectation within the family still remained that they should get married and have children.

LGBT 3: “Friends would talk to my mother about me and they would ask her ‘Does he have a girlfriend?’ [...] and then my mother said ‘oh yes, he has’. And I

asked her ‘why did you say that?’ and she responded: ‘I did not want you to look like an asocial person in their eyes’ [...] It is seen as a ‘must’... Single life, not getting married is the worst mistake that you could do.”

LGBT 4: “When my sister came out my parents were very disappointed. Our mother was very angry. With my mother that had also to do with the fact that my sister did not get married. If she would have done that first, and then would have followed her mind, I think it would not have been such a problem for my mother.”

The expectation that the European form of Islam will lead to a more liberal interpretation of Islamic beliefs, essentially can be seen as an expectation of interculturalism: it is assumed that secularized European culture and the culture of the Islamic minority will interact with one another, resulting in a more liberal, ‘European’ form of Islam. However, the opposite phenomenon is just as well-known: immigrant minorities can develop and stress their identity in a radical opposition to the dominant groups within their host society. The respondents in this project considered it as extremely doubtful whether the Islamic community would ever adopt ‘Western’ values:

LGBT 1: “The whole Muslim identity in Belgium is under attack in the last six to seven years and there is so much less space. Islam is retreating on itself, is turning back [...]. This makes it a lot harder to discuss something that is outside the lines of Islam.”

Resp 2: “Here in Europe homosexuality is something very normal.”

LTGB 1: “That is a thing they perpetually repeated when I was in Tunisia, that homosexuality is a purely Western idea.”

LGBT 2: “The older generation will often say this: ‘We came to the West and look what has happened to our children: they become pregnant when they are twenty without being married, our sons become gay and more stuff like that.’ So they really see this as a Western phenomenon and a Western disease. At least the generation older than forty or fifty does so.”

Nevertheless, we did also observe some contradiction in this respect. While on the one hand it was claimed again and again that homosexuality should be seen as a ‘Western’ phenomenon, the respondents on the other hand did acknowledge that homosexuality does exist, too, in their country of origin, whether this was Turkey, Morocco or Tunisia. The main difference, according to them, is that in those countries homosexuality cannot be considered as an open and fully legitimized lifestyle.

Girl 4: “You also have homosexuality in Morocco, but I think the difference is that there you also have men that just go with each other [...] that they are not really homosexual, but just have sex with each other.”

Girl 7: “That doesn’t mean that there are no gays in the Muslim community. They are there, but you just don’t find them that often [as in western Europe].”

LGBT 3: “Surprising things happen; there is this drag queen that appears on Turkish television during day time on a talk show for women. And he is gay, you know...and people must guess that he doesn’t have a girlfriend. [...] So implicitly

things are changing, surely among young people, but it depends on where they are living.”

Another important element to be taken into account is that the older generation of Islamic immigrants to Europe had low educational levels (OECD, 2008). Among the younger age groups, the average education level in general is higher than that of their parents. Quite some respondents mentioned this to be an important element in the ‘generation gap’ between their generation and the generation of their parents:

LGBT 3: “People just don’t know what homosexuality is, this is another big problem. [...] An average person in Turkey would think that I go out at midnight wearing women’s clothes and do prostitution or something...some people would really think that.”

Resp 2: “The parents who arrived here in the sixties are rather secluded and remain that way. People who lived in the mountains back there and never went to school want their children to be just as they are. But they don’t realize that it is for fifty percent their own fault that their children hang around on the streets. But the state is not doing much either to prevent that.”

The immigration experience therefore, does not make it easier to develop a coherent outlook toward homosexuality. Respondents are torn between competing claims, on the one hand from the Belgian education system and the prevailing set of values in the country, on the other hand from their feeling of belonging to the traditional community within their country of origin. Despite rapid contemporary changes in some of these countries, traditional views on gender roles and marriage obligations still are clearly dominant, even among urban elites (Gelbal & Dunyan, 2006). This implies that conflicting views on homosexuality can be present simultaneously, without the respondents making a very strong effort to reconcile these views:

Girl 4: “I think immigrants are also more at odds with themselves. Because it is just so much harder to grow up in a Western society with our background and they keep on hammering on this point that you are Islamic and they always talk about the Islamic world as if it is one indivisible thing, which it is not. And they are like ‘you are so and so’. Then of course you start getting curious. Even if you’re not really religious, you will go look for your identity through your religion. You will start studying your religion to find out.”

Discussion

In this article we have tried to arrive at a better understanding of the view toward homosexuality among the Islamic minority population in Belgium. Since we can assume that existing quantitative methods are not sufficiently sensitive for this specific cultural view, we opted for qualitative research. We conducted focus group interviews with four different groups: young Muslim boys and young Muslim girls, the responsible persons of a large mosque and four Muslims who identified as LGBT. This allowed us to investigate how the actors themselves perceived the sometimes strained relation between Islam and

homosexuality. For all respondents it was quite clear that the basic texts of Islam explicitly forbid homosexual behavior, but we did observe a lively discussion about what this entails for Muslim believers who do get involved in this form of behavior. Especially among the girls we interviewed, the view was prevalent that while the act as such might be considered as impure, this does not necessarily mean that the person itself can no longer be considered as a good Muslim. The fact that this view was particularly widespread among girls is in line with earlier research. It does indicate that any effort to mitigate prejudice among this group, should be sensitive to the occurrence of gender differences.

Our main conclusion, however, is that LGBT identity clearly is not simply an individual characteristic. The view of our respondents was fully embedded in a discourse on family obligations (Hopkins, 2006). On the one hand, the entire family stands to lose if one of the family members comes out as being gay or lesbian. The family honor might be compromised, with negative consequences for other family members throughout the community. The fact that ethnic minorities in Belgium tend to be geographically concentrated and segregated from mainstream community, even tends to strengthen this form of informal community pressure. But for the individual itself too, a gay or lesbian identity should be seen against the backdrop of family responsibilities. A homosexual role almost automatically entails that the individual will not marry, will not share the burden of continuing the family tradition, and will not have any children. Given the strong emphasis on family obligations, almost all respondents considered this to be an act of selfishness. This implies that the attitudes toward homosexuality cannot be considered in isolation from a consideration of the socio economic context. Because of discriminatory practices, ethnic minorities in Belgium are often economically excluded and this means they have fewer incentives to interact with others. This could lead to a more inward-looking world view, that is at odds with any effort to raise tolerance toward homosexuality among this group.